DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 181 945 JC 790 646

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TITLE Providing for the Unprepared College Student.
PUB DATE [79]
NOTE 9p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Colleges; *Dropout Prevention; *Educationally Disadvantaged; *Failure Factors; Junior Colleges; *Junior College Students; Learning Difficulties; Low Achievers; *Nontraditional Students; Open Enrollment; Persistence; Remedial Instruction; Self Concept; Student College Relationship

ABSTRACT

With an open door policy and the influx of non-traditionally oriented students, community colleges face one of the most critical issues in education today--educating the academically underprepared student. A large percentage of the Chicago City Colleges' enrollment scores in the lowest third on tests of academic ability. These students are not traditional college students, and it is a mistake to try to make them fit the traditional student mold by focusing on remediating academic, motivational, and financial deficiencies. In order for these students to be successful in a college environment, the college must provide many opportunities for success experiences and for those activities which enhance students' self-concepts. Curricula and support services must emphasize students' strengths and not their weaknesses. One major inhibiting factor to student success is the students' negative self-perception. Seligman's experiments with the learning patterns of dogs may provide some insight into the effects of repeated failure, and Atkinson and Feather's study of achievement motivation may provide guidelines for motivating the "failure-threatened personality." To insure equal opportunity as well as equal access, alternative teaching approaches should be attempted to accommodate varied learning styles, academic standards must be maintained, and the gap between the non-traditional student and the traditional college should be narrowed. (AYC)

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PROVIDING FOR THE UNPREPARED COLLEGE STUDENT

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PROVIDING FOR THE UNPREPARED COLLEGE STUDENT

Arnold P. Jones, Jr.

With an open door policy and the influx of non-traditionally oriented college students, the community colleges face one of the most critical issues in education today—educating the academically unprepared student.

Many relevant philosophical issues and their curricular implications come into focus when colleges must allow admission to virtually every student applying. One such philosophical dilemma is meritocracy versus egalitarianism. Quite simply stated, those who espouse meritocracy say that those students who "merit" a college education should be the ones who receive it. In short, this view was the revolt against aristocratic philosophies of college admissions which held that a college education is a birthright and not an earned right.

K. Patricia Cross, in Beyond the Open Door, indicates that advocates of meritocracy felt that criteria for college admission should be based upon scholastic ability and the willingness to study hard. Obviously, though, meritocratic principles were applied by means of rather narrow criteria of grades and test scores. While test scores and grades may meet the narrow definition of merit, these criteria are not applicable to a college system that basically has no criteria for admission.

It is interesting, yet paradoxical, to note that the rise of meritocracy was generally regarded as a move that led to the democratization of higher education. This egalitarianism applied only to the college bound aristocracy and the college bound meritocracy and not to everyone. In effect, meritocracy was supposed to mean that every one who deserved to go to college (based on tests and grades) would be able to go. However, there was no provision made

for the student who wanted to go to college and neither tested well nor had good grades. The concept of academic talent as the talent worthy of cultivation and encouragement represents a perspective that is too narrow. This perspective was broadened in the 1960's and we find a group of students who have not been, in significant numbers, a part of the college scene. They are the New Students and they are the subject of this paper.

Cross refers to the New Students as those who score in the lowest third on tests of academic ability. In general, a large percentage of City Colleges' student enrollment is comprised of the New Student. Many questions arise related to this New Student. How do we convert equal access to equal opportunity? Can we be equal and excellent too? Can egalitarianism and meritocracy coexist?

Perhaps the most difficult question is converting equal access to equal opportunity. Before that conversion can take place it is important to understand the psychological milieu in which we find the New Student. Primarily, the New Student is <u>not</u> a traditional college student and it appears that our fatal error is committed in an attempt to make him or her over to fit <u>the</u> traditional college student mold. Remedial courses are designed to remove academic "deficiencies"; counseling removes motivational "deficiencies"; and financial aid removes financial "deficiencies". Our major emphasis is on the students' weaknesses and it is no wonder that the self-fulfilling prophecy is operating at its maximum level.

In order for the New Student to be "successful" in a college environment, the College must provide many opportunities for success experiences and for those activities in general which enhance the students' self-concepts. Curricular emphasis should be placed on students' strengths instead of their weaknesses. The "deficiency syndrome" must be substituted with an efficiency model

which would be built around student strengths, programmed success experiences, in-service faculty workshops emphasizing the need for change, and an incorporation of varied learning styles in all curricula. In short, the New Student does not learn in the same way as the traditional student and provisions should be made to accommodate different learning styles.

One major inhibiting factor in the "successful" completion of college level work is the students' negative perception of himself. Some assumptions supporting this view may be inferred from several earlier studies by Seligman. In Seligman's experiments, although done with dogs instead of humans, he dealt with passivity to new learning experiences and then identified procedures that would make these "passive" learners into "active" learners again. "Although dogs are not people, the parallels to human learning and to failure-threatened personalities make for fascinating speculation and the generation of some testable hypotheses." Seligman and his associates conducted a standard conditioning experiment in which a dog was placed in a box with an electric grid on the floor. The lights dimmed, ten seconds later the shock came on, and the dog howled and ran around showing fear and lack of purposive behavior. During the random activity the dog managed to throw himself over the barriers and out of the box, at which point he escaped from shock and the light went on again. With repeated trials, the dog learned to jump over the barrier (purposeful behavior) as soon as the lights dimmed, thus avoiding the shock altogether.

The results were quite different for dogs who had previously been shocked in the box <u>while in a harness</u> that prevented escape. Twenty-four hours later, these dogs entered the experiment "knowing" that nothing they did would terminate the shock. Struggling in the harness had no effect. When they were later put in the box <u>unharnessed</u> and free to learn to escape just as the naive dogs had been, they howled for just a few seconds when the shock came on and then

settled down and took the shock. After several trials, the dogs ceased even trying to escape and became passive, or helpless.

The situation is analogous to that of a student who tries hard in the beginning but who finds that he never gets rewarded: a high grade, the teacher's approval, or classmates' admiration. After repeated experience, he does learn something--that the result of trying is failure!!

Obviously, complex human learning is not explained by simple animal learning, but generalizations in the light of these findings are appropriate. The student who has become passive must be shown that a new kind of learning situation exists--a situation where he can almost be guaranteed a genuine opportunity to succeed - depending entirely on his own efforts.

Atkinson and Feather, in their theory of achievement motivation, have found in their studies what they refer to as a failure-threatened personality and have developed a theory of achievement motivation concerning this kind of person. The theory states that the achievement-oriented person works hardest at a task of intermediate difficulty, where his chances of success are 50-50. He is not challenged by a too easy task which gives him no rewarding feeling of success, nor a too difficult task where his reward is too unlikely. He is basically realistic, raising his aspirations with success and lowering them with failure. He is motivated to try his skills because his past experience has contributed to his self-confidence and he is willing to take some risks. The failure-threatened individual, on the other hand, avoids tasks in which the outcome is uncertain. He is motivated to defend himself against the threat of failure either by selecting easy tasks where success is virtually assured, or by attempting such difficult tasks that failure is expected and therefore not threatening. School, to the New Student, has been threatening from the elementary level and continues to be the same.

School--the college--represents to some students a threat to their sense of well-being. Many of these New Students have entered college because of societal pressures, economic needs, and a perception that college credentials will improve the quality of their lives.

In order to meet the students' perceived needs the college must first enroll him as a student and then retain him. The inference that can be drawn from this discussion is that the students' needs are not being met. We are not meeting those needs because we are attempting to transform the New Student into the traditional College Student. The New Student's cultural emphasis, which embraces his learning style, is different from that of the traditional student and is not generally taken into consideration in the development of curricula. Additionally, the "deficit" approach to him as a student reinforces failure. We can not retain students in that kind of psychological environment. Before addressing some of the approaches that may assist us in increasing enrollment, retaining students and generally improving the quality of the educational program let me summarize our discussion.

* Retention of students is based on meeting student needs.

* The New Student, primarily without the skills of the traditional College Student, has been the beneficiary of a "deficiency syndrome".

* Because the New Student is "deficient" in practically all of the skills needed to successfully complete college, emphasis is placed on remediation in an effort to mold the New Student into the image of the traditional college student. Since the New Student can not be the traditional college student, there is a reinforcement of failure, students' needs are unmet, and the New Student leaves school.

* In order to retain that student, several things need to be done:

  (1) Provide genuine success experiences that enhance the learner's self-concept;

(2) Improve the quality of teaching by considering alternate teaching approaches to accommodate varied learning styles;

(3) Make the New Student aware that while there can be no compromise in academic standards, supportive services will be provided which emanate from his strengths and not his deficiencies with the only limitation in attainment being the extent of his willingness to try;

(4) The Colleges must not expect the students to make all of the adjustments but the gap between the New Students and the traditional college must be closed but it must be closed by movement on the part of both; and

(5) Believe in the absolute educability (barring mental retardation) of all of the New Students and transform that belief into the "Impossible Dream".

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MAR 14 1980